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ABSTRACT

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was organized in 1981 as the accrediting agency responsible for reviewing and evaluating counseling and student affairs practice in higher education programs against a set of nationally recognized standards. The CACREP accreditation process incorporates a pattern of review that includes integral self-study of the program against nationally accepted criteria, followed by an on-site visit by an evaluation team, and a subsequent review and accreditation decision rendered by a central governing group. This digest explores the specific levels of assessment and evaluation involved in the CACREP accreditation process as well as provides an overview of the curricular experiences in assessment and evaluation. (JBJ)

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by Carol L. Bobby and Joseph R. Kandor

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Carol L. Bobby and Joseph R. Kandor

Overview

The Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) was organized in 1981 as the accrediting agency responsible for reviewing and evaluating counseling and student affairs practice in higher education programs against a set of nationally recognized standards. Its incorporation as an independent body was the culmination of years of work by the American Counseling Association (ACA) and its divisions to define the knowledge and skills required for entry into the profession and to advocate that these requirements be implemented by the preparation programs offering counseling and student affairs practice degrees. Striving to foster excellence in its organizational development, CACREP sought an external review and evaluation of its own accrediting practices by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) and was awarded recognition status by this body in 1987. This recognition has been maintained and was recently transferred to the Commission on Recognition of Postsecondary Accreditation (CORPA) in a recent restructuring of the recognition function.

As a CORPA recognized accrediting agency, the CACREP accreditation process must incorporate a pattern of review that includes integral self-study of the program against nationally accepted criteria, followed by an on-site visit by an evaluation team, and a subsequent review and accreditation decision rendered by a central governing group. This pattern illustrates the important role that assessment and evaluation play in every accreditation agency's process. The purpose of this digest is to explore the specific levels of assessment and evaluation involved in the CACREP accreditation process, as well as to provide an overview of curricular experiences in assessment and evaluation.

Assessment and Evaluation in the CACREP Review Process

The CACREP review process is a multi-level assessment and evaluation process with four basic levels of review occurring simultaneously. These levels are: 1) the program's internal assessment and evaluation of how the CACREP standards are implemented; 2) an external review of the program by CACREP to determine compliance with the standards; 3) regular and systematic program evaluation based upon the program's own mission and objectives; and 4) regular and systematic evaluation of CACREP's accreditation process based upon its mission and objectives. As a voluntary activity, a program's participation in the CACREP review process speaks to a high level of commitment to quality assurance in program delivery to students.

An Overview of the Accreditation ReviewProcess

The first two levels listed above are integral to the CACREP accreditation process, as they involve the three general requirements of self-study, on-site evaluation, and final decision review that are common to all accrediting agency reviews. Within these three general requirements, however, are many points at which assessment and evaluation occur. During the internal review, a program begins to examine itself against the CACREP eligibility requirements and standards. Following a preliminary review of the accreditation standards, a program will need to assess resources such as faculty support, institutional support, administrative support, budgetary support, clinical facilities, library and research facilities and services, and student enrollments to determine if the benefits of pursuing accreditation at this time can be balanced with the costs and potential need to reallocate resources. If the answer is yes, the program begins a more formal internal evaluation of how each of the CACREP standards is perceived to be met. The results of this evaluation are compiled in a self-study report, appended with supporting documentation, and submitted to CACREP for an external review.

The external review also requires several steps. First is an initial review of the self-study report by a subcommittee of CACREP's governing board. If the reviewers concur that the self-study adequately addresses the eligibility requirements and standards, a site visit is recommended. The next phase of review involves sending a team of trained volunteers to the campus to validate the responses provided in the self-study report. The team spends a minimum of three days at the program's campus evaluating the program against the standards by reviewing additional documentation, visiting relevant facilities and sites, and interviewing students, graduates, faculty, administrators and clinical supervisors. At the completion of the on-site visit, the team members submit a report to CACREP that reflects their evaluation of the program's compliance with the standards. Programs are then allowed to review the team's report and respond to the relative accuracy of its content.

The final step of the external review entails an evalua-

tion of a program's compliance with the standards by CACREP's governing body, the Board of Directors. At this point in the process, the Board has access to the original self-study report, the team's report, the program's response to the team's report, and all appended documentation. A thorough review of all documents occurs and a decision is rendered to award or deny accreditation to the program.

Program Evaluation Requirements

In addition to the internal and external evaluation that occurs as part of the CACREP accreditation review process, a program seeking accreditation must document its own process of regular and systematic program evaluation. According to Section VI: Evaluation in the Program of the CACREP Standards, such evaluations should include:

1) developmental, systematic assessment of each student's progress throughout the program with consideration given to academic performance, professional development, and personal development;

2) internal and ongoing reviews by program faculty of curricular offerings, objectives, professional trends, student learning outcomes, and types of students seeking admission to the program;

3) external review through follow-up studies with graduates of the program to assess their perceptions and evaluations of major aspects of the program;

4) assessment of perceptions about the program among employers of graduates, field placement supervisors, and cooperating agency personnel, and;

5) assessment of faculty by currently enrolled students.

These criteria insure that evaluation become an important component of every CACREP accredited program and that the evaluation involves multi-levels of assessment.

Evaluation of CACREP

The fourth level of evaluation important to the CACREP accreditation process involves evaluating the evaluators; that is, CACREP's examination of itself through internal and external review mechanisms. Just as programs seeking accreditation are required to complete a self-study report that addresses a program's compliance with standards, CACREP must periodically review itself against a set of criteria that represent good accrediting practices. Documenting compliance with these criteria is the basis for receiving and maintaining status as a recognized accrediting agency. Similar to the CACREP process, the recognition process entails a series of review steps before final decisions are rendered.

In addition to this review process, CACREP has also put into place a series of procedures to allow for regular and systematic review of its activities. A complete review of the CACREP standards must occur every seven years. It is at this time that CACREP seeks comment from educators, practitioners, administrators, supervisors, students, graduates, employers, and the public regarding the content of its curricular, clinical, institutional, and program requirements. Rationales for recommended changes with an assessment of the impact of the recommended changes are reviewed by a committee, and drafts with recommended changes circulated for further comment. The process entails a series of draft review and comment periods prior to final adoption of revised standards. The process ensures that the standards remain responsive to the needs of a dynamic and changing society.

Other avenues of evaluation include assessing a program's satisfaction with the conduct of the on-site team visit, as well as the program's perceptions of both the site visitors' and CACREP staff's understanding of the philosophy of accreditation and knowledge of the standards. CACREP staff have also conducted periodic research on issues such as inhibitors to seeking accreditation and the frequency with which certain standards are cited for noncompliance in the final accreditation review.

Curricular Experiences in Assessment and Evaluation

Within a CACREP program, students must complete coursework related to assessment and evaluation. Standard II.J.6-Appraisal and Standard II.J.7- Research and Program Evaluation in the CACREP Accreditation Standards and Procedures Manual (1994) outline the specific curricular experiences required of every student in the program.

Appraisal includes studies that provide an understanding of individual and group approaches to assessment and evaluation. Research and program evaluation requires studies that provide an understanding of types of research methods, basic statistics and ethical and legal considerations in research.

Within doctoral programs, students must receive curricular experiences that represent an extension of the requirements for appraisal and evaluation outlined above (Doctoral Standard II.A). The program must also provide the doctoral student with advanced preparation in design and implementation of quantitative and qualitative research and methodology (Doctoral Standard II.C.4) and models and methods of appraisal (Doctoral Standard II.C.5).

Summary

The concepts of assessment and evaluation are significant throughout the CACREP accreditation process and standards. Assessment and evaluation remain at the heart of the practice and procedures used by CACREP to ascertain whether a program will achieve or be denied accredited status. Furthermore, the accreditation standards themselves require that not only are students provided knowledge and skills in the areas of assessment and evaluation, but that programs regularly and systematically assess these types of curricular offerings, along with other aspects of program operations.

The importance of CACREP undergoing periodic evaluation of its own accrediting practices and standards should not be underestimated. It is the combination of results from each of the various levels of evaluation described in this paper that allow for quality assurance in program development while simultaneously embracing change so that entering professionals will have the knowledge and skills necessary to deal with our rapidly changing society

References

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